



PRIMARY CARE IN MASSACHUSETTS: AN OVERVIEW OF TRENDS AND OPPORTUNITIES

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Research on primary care both locally and nationally shows the supply of primary care physicians (PCPs) may be insufficient to meet the demand for primary care services, especially in some geographic areas. This report presents an overview of primary care in Massachusetts.

Supply and Access to Primary Care Physicians in Massachusetts

- Massachusetts ranks number one in the country for its supply of both total physicians and primary care physicians. The state has more specialists than primary care physicians.
- While the state's average primary care to population ratio is high, there is significant variation in the distribution of PCPs across the state. Fourteen percent of Massachusetts residents are living in areas federally designated as primary care health professional shortage areas (HPSAs). As of 2009, an additional 214 PCPs were needed to adequately serve these residents.
- More residents in Massachusetts have gained access to PCPs since the implementation of health care reform. Between 2006 and 2008, the rate of Massachusetts residents with no PCP declined from 12.2% to 11.0%, respectively, as reform expanded health insurance coverage to more residents.
- Despite gains in insurance coverage, 22% of the state's residents reported difficulty obtaining care in 2009.
- In 2009, new patients, on average, had to wait 44 days to get a physician appointment for non-urgent primary care. Fewer primary care physician offices were also accepting new patients. The proportion of family medicine physician offices accepting new patients declined from 70% in 2007 to 60% in 2009; for internal medicine, the proportion of physician offices accepting new patients declined from 66% in 2005 to 44% in 2009.

Factors Influencing the Supply of Primary Care Physicians

- A variety of factors influence the supply of primary care physicians, such as low overall physician satisfaction, demographic challenges, a shrinking primary care workforce, and recruitment and retention issues.
- Nationally, the income of PCPs dropped by 10.2% from 1995 to 2003.
- In 1998, 54% of internal medicine residents reported interest in primary care. By 2005, the number choosing primary care careers had declined by more than 50%.
- Between 2006 and 2007, approximately 1,200 physicians (both specialists and PCPs) left Massachusetts to practice in other states.

Opportunities and Recent Efforts to Improve Primary Care Delivery

- Both in Massachusetts and nationally, several approaches have been suggested for addressing the PCP supply and reducing geographic variation: improving the primary care delivery system and reforming payment by implementing patient-centered medical homes and redesigning the primary care practice (shared medical appointments and open access scheduling).
- The Patient Protection and Affordability Care Act of 2010 (PPACA) outlines specific initiatives for supporting the role of primary care and PCPs in the delivery of health care, including increased payment and reimbursement levels for primary care professionals, debt reduction, and loan repayment for PCPs.

About DHC FP

The mission of the Division of Health Care Finance and Policy is to improve health care quality and contain health care costs by critically examining the Massachusetts health care delivery system and providing objective information, developing and recommending policies, and implementing strategies that benefit the people of the Commonwealth.